



SECRET STATE

Photographer Scott McCarten is an urban explorer and cultural historian, focusing his camera on South Australia's abandoned buildings and forgotten places

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It starts with pigeons, living in the rafters of the old wool store, fluttering about our heads as we climb the stairs – two brave urban explorers: Scott McCarten, camera and tripod in hand, leading me into a building that hasn't been used for decades. Pigeon poo an inch thick, crunching like dry bones as we

walk across the old floorboards. Graffiti, explaining that Darren loves John (or maybe it's Jane).

"I've been waiting on this one for ages," McCarten tells me. Like a trip to Paris, or a lottery win, although McCarten is no Tuscan townhouse and low-cut lawn man. He's an aesthete, a lover of the old, of decay, history, what has been more than what might come.

Not that this makes him dour, dark,

depressed. No, this explorer just sees what others don't. "This is very raw – you can see what used to happen here and you get a sense of the people and industry," he says.

We move from floor to floor of the old store, oval-sized caverns purged of their past and purpose, acres of emptiness that used to hold tens of thousands of wool bales. But now, just ghosts.

McCarten, whose website autopsyofadelaide.com aims to present a considered record of our cultural history, has taken time off from his day job to make a record of a place that, by his own admission, might not be around in 10 years. The small toilet and urinal in the corner, more pigeon do, graffiti, although nothing too angry.

McCarten explains how long it's taken to get access. "If you're dealing with some guy,

he's likely to give you approval, but if it's a consortium it's got to go through boards and all sorts." And even then, he says, he's careful about what he puts online. "I've seen too many places get destroyed."

Urban exploration is the going, the seeing, the recording, the smelling and tasting of out-of-the-way places. Theory being, every city has them, but few are allowed access. A sort of local Cites of the Underworld, or maybe a riff on SBS's *Abandoned*, a documentary series exploring surplus-to-need urban spaces.

Ghost malls, speedways, deserted schools selling for a few hundred dollars. Not so much for the sake of commentary, or analysis, but for the inherent aesthetic appeal of these places.

McCarten explains: "I've been in

abandoned buildings in the centre of the city – still got their power, hot water. If I was homeless it'd be great. I've only ever encountered one homeless person sleeping in an abandoned building, and I've been hundreds." But he insists he's never broken into a building, although some were open. "Buildings you'd think are high secure and alarmed, aren't."

We descend to the basement, a fitting setting for a horror film: bits of machinery, doors, the remains of offices, a place to be at night. An old seat in front of a window, like someone has just gone out for coffee.

As we walk I ask McCarten about the appeal of urban exploration. "I just kept uncovering these places. It's not just photographic appealing, it's the story. I've just fallen into it... I don't want to do weddings and sunsets, it's just not me."

You either get it or you don't. The idea that life is finite: us, our pets, our homes, whatever we spend our time doing. As he starts working, McCarten says